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## **William Manning, “The Key of Liberty: Showing the Causes Why a Free Government Has Always Failed and a Remedy against It” (1799).**

To all the Republicans, Farmers, Mechanics, and Laborers in America in America. Your candid attention is requested to the sentiments of a Laborer.

Learning and knowledge is essential to the preservation of liberty; and unless we have more of it among us, we cannot support our liberties long.

Millions and millions of lives have been lost and oceans of blood have been spilled in revolutions to establish free governments. But melancholy to relate, the history of all ages proves that they have been but of short duration in comparison with arbitrary ones. It is but about twenty years since our revolution in America, when we established governments so free and rational that they commanded not only the wonder and admiration of America but almost all over Europe. Yet we now see a majority of our leading men not only sickening at republican principles but also using their strongest influence to bring us under an arbitrary government. And this too at a time when they are under the greatest struggles to establish free government similar to our own almost all over Europe. At such an important crisis as this, I conceive it to be not only the right but the duty of everyone to search diligently for the causes of this change, and, if possible, to find out a remedy for so great an evil. Under this conviction, I undertake to give you my sentiments on them.

I am not a man of learning, for I never had the advantage of six months schooling in my life. I am no traveler, for I never was fifty miles from where I was born. I am no great reader, for though I have a small landed interest, I always followed labor for a living.

But I always thought it my duty to search into and see for myself in all matters that concerned me as a member of society. And when the revolution began in America I was in the prime of life, and highly taken up with the ideas of liberty and a free government. I was in the Concord fight and saw almost the first blood shed in the cause. I thought then and still think that it is a good cause, which we ought to fight for and maintain. I have also been a constant reader of public newspapers and have closely attended to men and measures ever since -- though the war, through the operation of paper money, framing constitutions, and making and construing laws. Seeing what little selfish and contracted ideas of interest would twist and turn the best picked men and bodies of men, I have often almost despaired of ever supporting a free government. But firmly believing it to be the best sort, and the only one approved of by heaven, it has been my unwearied study to find out the real cause of the ruin of republics and a remedy....

A General Description of the Causes that Ruin Republics....

### 1. A Description of Mankind and the Necessity of Government....

Men are born and grow up in this world with a vast variety of capacities, strengths, and abilities both of body and mind, and have strongly implanted in them numerous passions and lusts continually urging them to acts of fraud, violence, and injustice towards each other. Although they have implanted in them a sense of right and wrong (so that if they would always follow the dictates of their consciences and do as they would be done by, they would need no other law or government), yet as they are sentenced by the just decrees of heaven to hard labor for a living in this world, and have so strongly implanted in them a desire of self-support, self-defense, self-love, self-conceit, and self-aggrandizement that it engrosses all their care and attention -- so that they can see nothing beyond self. For self (as once described by a divine) is like an object placed before the eye that hinders the sight of every thing beyond.

This selfishness may be discerned in every person, let their conditions in life be what they will; and it operates so powerfully as to disqualify them from judging right in their own cause. There is no station in this life that a man can be raised to that clears him from

this selfishness. On the contrary, it is a solemn truth that the higher a person is raised in stations of honor, power, and trust[,] the greater are his temptations to do wrong and gratify those selfish principles. Give a man honor and he wants more. Give a man power and he wants more. Give him money and he wants more. In short, he is never easy: but the more he has[,] the more he wants....

From these natural dispositions of mankind arise not only the advantages but the absolute necessity of civil government. Without it, mankind would be continually at war on their own species, stealing and robbing, fighting with, and killing one another. This all nations on earth have been convinced of and have established it in some form or other; and their sole aim in doing it is their safety and happiness. But for want of wisdom or some plan to curb the ambition and govern those to whom they gave power, they have often been brought to suffer as much under their government as they would without any; and it still remains uncertain whether such a plan can be found or not....

### 3. To Show How the Few and Many Differ in their Ideas of Interest....

Here lies the great scuffle between the Few and the Many.

As the interests of the Few -- and their incomes -- lie chiefly in money at interests, rents, salaries, and fees that are fixed on the nominal value of money, they are interested to have the money scarce and the prices of labor and produce as low as possible. For instance, if the price of labor and produce should fall one-half, it would be just the same to them as if their rents, fees, and salaries were doubled -- all of which increase [what] they get of the Many. Besides, the fall of the price of labor and produce, and the scarcity of money, always bring the Many into distress and compel them into a state of dependence on the Few for favors and assistances in a thousand ways.

On the other hand, if the Many could raise the price of labor and produce, and have money circulate freely, they would pay their debts and enjoy the good of their labors without being dependent on the Few for assistance. Also, when prices are high, a prudent and industrious person may presciently lay up something against a time of need. But the person that doth not work and lives high when the prices are up will soon spend all his property.

The greatest danger is from the judicial and executive departments of governments, especially from lawyers. These officers, all depending upon their fees and salaries for a living, are always interested in having money scarce and the people in their distress. The scarcer the money, the lower the price of labor and produce; the greater the distress of the Many, the better for them. It not only doubles the nominal value of their fees and salaries but doubles and triples their business, and the people are obliged to come to them cap in hand and beg for mercy, patience, and forbearance. This gratifies both their pride and covetousness. But when money is plenty and circulates freely, they have little or nothing to do.

This is the greatest reason why judicial and executive officers ought to be kept entirely from the legislative body. And unless there can be wisdom enough in the people to keep the three departments of government entirely separate from each other, a free government cannot be supported. For in all these disputes of jarring interests, it is the business and duty of the legislature to determine what is right and what is wrong. And it is the duty of all in the nation to regulate their conduct according to the laws the legislators make. To such laws the Many would be ever willing to submit -- provided that the three departments were kept separate, and that they were fully and fairly represented in the legislature; and the Many would be always willing and zealous to support that government.

But the Few cannot bear to be on a level with their fellow creatures, or submit to the determination of a legislature where (as they say) the swinish multitude are fairly represented. They sicken at the idea, and are ever hankering and striving after monarchy or aristocracy, where the people have nothing to do in matters of government but to support the Few in luxury and idleness. For these and many other reasons, a large majority of those that live without labor are ever opposed to a free government. And though the whole of them do not amount to one-eighth part of the people, and not one-half of them are needed in their professions, yet by their arts, combinations, and schemes they have always made out to destroy free government sooner or later.

Which I shall endeavor to make appear by pointing out --

#### 4. The Means by which the Few Destroy Free Government

The sole foundation on which the Few build all their schemes to destroy free government is the ignorance and superstition of, or the want of knowledge among, the Many. Solomon said, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." And it is as true that if a child is trained up in the way he should not go, when he is old, he will keep to it. It is the universal custom and practice of monarchical and arbitrary governments to train up their subjects as much in ignorance as they can as to matters of government and policy, and to teach them to reverence and worship great men in office and to take for truth whatever they say without examining or trying to see for themselves. And they often make an engine of religion, mixing it with their politics....

These are the principal grounds on which the Few work to destroy free governments. But there always are many among the orders of the Few who are true friends of liberty; and many of the laborers who understand their true interests, who warmly oppose the measures of the Few -- so that it requires the utmost precautions and cunning of them to attain their ends. Finding their schemes and views of interest borne down by the Many, to gain the power they cannot constitutionally obtain, the Few endeavor to get it by cunning and corruption....

Consequently, the Few have to muster all their craft and force in elections. They will all unite in extolling the greatness, goodness, and abilities of their candidate and in running down and blackening the characters and abilities of the candidates on the other side....

Also, they will hinder votes from being counted....